



## **#76 The Gulag Archipelago and The Wisdom of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn**

“And the lie has, in fact, led us so far away from a normal society that you cannot even orient yourself any longer; in its dense, gray fog not even one pillar can be seen.” (Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*)

These words were penned by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the Russian author most famous for his book *The Gulag Archipelago* which provides a harrowing account of the Soviet prison system, and Soviet society in general, during the country’s great communist experiment of the 20th century.

Solzhenitsyn spent nearly a decade in prison camps for criticizing Stalin in a series of letters he wrote to a friend while he was fighting for the Soviet Red Army during World War II. During his time in the gulags Solzhenitsyn experienced firsthand both the heights that people could reach and the depths into which they could fall during times of severe crisis. In this video we are going to examine some of his fascinating insights on communism, the nature of evil, the importance of speaking the truth, and the ability to affirm life even in the face of great suffering.

Early in Solzhenitsyn’s life, like most Russian youth, he was a firm believer in communism. However, these views began to change during World War II as his travels across Russia with the Red Army allowed him to see firsthand how poorly his fellow Russians were living, and how brutally they were treated by Stalin and the Soviet regime.

But while his time in the Red Army certainly jaded his views of communism, it was the time he spent in the gulags that turned him into one of the world’s harshest critics of this ideology. In 1977 at a talk given in Vermont, where he was living after a failed assassination attempt on him by the KGB followed by his banishment from Russia, Solzhenitsyn had this to say about communism:

“The Communist system is a disease, a plague that has been spreading across the earth for many years already, and it is impossible to predict what peoples will yet be forced to experience this disease firsthand. My people, the Russians, have been



suffering from it for 60 years already; they long to be healed.” (Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*)

However, Solzhenitsyn understood that one’s perception of communism is often far different if one is forced to experience it first hand, versus merely dreaming and theorizing about it from the relative comfort of a non-socialist country:

“For us in Russia communism is a dead dog, while, for many people in the West, it is still a living lion.” (Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*)

One of the purposes of *The Gulag Archipelago* was to reveal to the world the true horrors which occurred as the Soviet Union tried to transform itself into a society organized under communist principles. While many advocates of communism, and other variants of socialism, like to speak about how great a society would be if the tenets of socialism were adhered to, often overlooked is the fact that many people do not share in their vision and have no interest in handing over their property to the collective, and therefore, as occurred in Russia, force must be used against any who resist the great societal transformation.

The most important principle of communism, and socialism in general, the one around which much of its theory is built, is that the means of production should be owned in a collective, or public manner, in contrast to under capitalism where the means of production are privately owned. To accomplish this the Soviet leaders confiscated the property of farmers and other business owners and the class of Russians who bore the greatest brunt of this process were the Russian peasants known as the kulaks. The kulaks were the owners of small farms and the Soviet government instituted a program known as dekulakization to rid these people of their property. Solzhenitsyn spent considerable time in volume 3 of *The Gulag Archipelago* explaining and documenting the reality of this process:

“If a man had a brick house in a row of log cabins, or two stories in a row of one-story houses – there was your kulak: Get ready, you bastard, you got sixty minutes! There aren’t supposed to be any brick houses in the Russian village, there aren’t supposed to be two-story houses! Back to the cave! You don’t need a chimney for your fire! This is our great plan for transforming the country: history has never seen the like of it.” (Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*)



But the fate of the kulaks was not limited to them losing their property, rather as Solzhenitsyn notes millions of them lost their lives in the process. After having their property confiscated many were forcibly driven into the harsh Russian wilderness and left to fend for themselves. Solzhenitsyn describes an infamous incident in which 10,000 families, or approximately 60,000 people, were driven from their homes and forced to settle on marshland during the harsh Russian winter:

“No food or tools were left for them. The roads were impassable, and there was no way through to the world outside, except for two brushwood paths. . . Machine-gunners manned barriers on both paths and let no one through from the death camp. They started dying like flies. Desperate people came out to the barriers begging to be let through, and were shot on the spot...They died off – every one of them...There’s no other way to build the New Society.” (Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*)

But for some kulaks, being driven into the wilderness turned out far better than having to live in Soviet society. For having been left in remote areas to die, they were freed from the dire conditions imposed on them by communist rule:

“It sometimes happened” Solzhenitsyn wrote, “that they transported ex-“kulaks” out into the tundra or the taiga [swampy forests], let them loose, and forgot about them. Why keep count when you’d taken them there to die? . . . Now that the mysteriously wise leaders had dismissed them – without horses, without plows, without fishing tackle, without guns – this hard-working and stubborn race of men, armed perhaps with a few axes and shovels, began the hopeless fight for life in conditions scarcely easier than in the Stone Age. And in defiance of the economic laws of socialism, some of the settlements not only survived, but became rich and vigorous!. . .The things that could’ve been done with such people if they had been allowed to live and develop freely!!!” (Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*)

While the kulaks experienced a brutal fate, they were not alone in experiencing the destruction which accompanied the Soviet’s attempt to transform Russia into a communist paradise. Rather when all was said and done tens of millions of



people perished under communist rule and Solzhenitsyn's first-hand experience of this made him acutely interested in the nature of evil.

In his reflections on evil in *The Gulag Archipelago* Solzhenitsyn emphasized that all people are capable of evil and that often evil is committed because those involved ignorantly believe themselves to be wholly and unmistakably on the side of good.

“Gradually it was disclosed to me” Solzhenitsyn wrote “that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, not between classes, not between political parties either – but right through every human heart – and through all human hearts. This line shifts. Inside us, it oscillates with the years. And even within hearts overwhelmed by evil, one small bridgehead of good is retained. And even in the best of all hearts, there remains. . . an unuprooted small corner of evil. . . It is impossible to expel evil from the world in its entirety, but it is possible to constrict it within each person.” (Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*)

Solzhenitsyn stressed that the reason many people are unaware that they are complicit in acts of evil-doing is because dogmatic adherence to an ideology provides them with justifications and excuses for their actions. For example, adherence to the communist ideology, which promises a coming utopia by disallowing people to privately own the means of production, allows its adherents to mask evil actions in a false cloak of good. Or as Solzhenitsyn put it:

“Ideology – that is what gives evil doing its long-sought justification and gives the evildoer the necessary steadfastness and determination. That is the social theory which helps to make his acts seem good instead of bad in his own and others' eyes, so that he won't hear reproaches and curses but will receive praise and honors... Thanks to ideology, the 20th century was fated to experience evil-doing on a scale calculated in the millions. This cannot be denied, nor passed over, nor suppressed.” (Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*)

In addition to his interest in the nature of evil, Solzhenitsyn was also very concerned with discovering the best way to combat it. The conclusion he came to was that ultimately the greatest antidote to evil is truth:



“Let your credo be this: Let the lie come into the world, let it even triumph. But not through me.”

To live by this credo, it is essential for people not to shy away from raising their voices even when others attempt to silence them:

“We have to condemn publicly the very idea that some people have the right to repress others. In keeping silent about evil, in burying it so deep within us that no sign of it appears on the surface, we are implanting it, and it will rise up a thousandfold in the future.” (Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*)

In addition to his insights on evil and his views on the importance of speaking the truth, Solzhenitsyn’s time in the gulags also taught him a lot about the nature of suffering and the ability of people to find contentment even in the harshest of conditions. Throughout the three volumes of *The Gulag Archipelago* Solzhenitsyn discusses the remarkable strength of some of his fellow prisoners. For example, there were some prisoners with sentences of 25 years, who lived an almost blissful existence, an existence far superior to anything Solzhenitsyn had seen prior to his time spent in the gulags:

“...they were people who had withdrawn so deeply into the life of the mind that no bodily suffering could upset their spiritual equilibrium.” (Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*)

Solzhenitsyn suggested that those who were able to survive and not break down mentally in the gulags were very often those who had adopted a Stoic approach to life. This approach Solzhenitsyn strove to adhere to, and is reflected in the following insight which also serves as a stark reminder that one’s state of mind ultimately has the power to overcome even the harshest of external conditions.

“Satiety depends not at all on how much we eat, but on how we eat. It’s the same with happiness, the very same...happiness doesn’t depend on how many external blessings we have snatched from life. It depends only on our attitude toward them. There’s a saying about it in the Taoist ethic: ‘Whoever is capable of contentment will always be satisfied.’” (Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The First Circle*)